

# The Forgotten Art of Cupola Design

A Retrospective On Mid 19th To Early 20th Century Cupolas



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# Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Cupola Design	4
Aesthetics	4
Sizing a Cupola	4
Gallery	5



# Introduction

Let me first qualify that I do not make or sell cupolas. I am a weathervane maker. While weathervanes and cupolas are inherently connected they are distinctly different creative endeavors.

My curiosity and interest in cupolas are directly related to my interest in weathervanes. While there are many creative ways to install weathervanes, cupolas are often the most aesthetically pleasing.

Much of my perspective on what constitutes good cupola design is based on years of general observation growing up in New England and in the last decade as a weathervane maker. I have the good fortune to have discovered my vocation in what was once the heart of the American weathervane industry. New England's rural small towns and cities still have significant examples of 19th and early 20th century carriage houses, cupolas and weathervanes from the period's masters.

Residential cupolas achieved their highest form in the mid 19th to early 20th century on carriage houses, or as they have been described "houses for horses" - the predecessor to contemporary automobile garages. Rural farm, barn cupolas in general tend to be less creative and sophisticated reflecting their agrarian utility while carriage houses were typically dressed-up urban horse barns with sometimes fantastically ornate cupolas, reflecting the country's rising industrial prosperity and passion for the horse and carriage.

During this period, driving one's horse and carriage and horse racing are generally acknowledged to be America's first national pastime and sporting obsession. According to the U.S. Census, American transportation near the turn of the century relied on 18



Retro-cupola built to compliment an 18th century Nantucket colonial reproduction and detached 2 1/2 car Salt Box garage. 36" Brook Trout weathervane, scale 4:1.

million horses and mules, 10 million bicycles and 8,000 electric, steam or internal combustion engine automobiles.

The forgotten art of cupola design coincides with the 20th century's decline of equestrian transportation, and the rise of automobiles. Automobile garages do not require lofts to store hay and cupolas to vent off drying hay's potentially combustible heat.

From the collective amnesia of equestrian needs and cupola utility, contemporary cupolas have become retailer's caricatures and builder's after-thoughts that rarely resemble their highly evolved architectural and utilitarian predecessors.

As an exercise in design theory and sweat equity, I built a cupola for a previous shop (30' x 24' salt box pictured above). I have also climbed inside, photographed and studied 19th and early 20th century cupolas including my Maine shop's late 19th century Victorian carriage house cupola.

Due to the dearth of contemporary retail cupola options, this modest retrospective is intended to provide standards that characterize cupolas built from the height of their design and construction, and in particular a reference for one whom is interested in building an architectural compliment to one of my fish weathervanes.

## NOTE

Thank you for your interest in my modest retrospective on cupola design. This is a working document and as such is currently in development. When time allows I'll expand on design, aesthetics and sizing a cupola. The gallery provides examples of mid nineteenth and early twentieth century cupolas that exemplifies the era's design, size and scale. Like weathervanes, sizing a cupola is best done on a case-by-case basis. Contact me if you have questions about sizing a cupola. I'll be happy to discuss them with you and what might be an appropriate size for your project.



A wonderful example of 19th century cupola design, where the cupola's architecture exceeds the main structure, and is clearly meant to be the architectural focal point.

A cross gabled slate roof with Greek revival pediments. Single arched shutters complimented with columns and intricate mill work. Carved post. Based on the carriage house size (25'x25') the cupola is approximately 4'x4' wide and 8' high. Northern Maine, 19th century.

Beautifully scaled to the main house and its mill work. Notice the same architectural design elements with the house - particularly the deep triangular Greek revival pediments. Also notice how the cupola's design complexity and large size draws and holds one's eye. Folk Victorian.



In character with the attached home and carriage house's design, Queen Anne & Stick style Victorian elements - steep cross gabled roof, over hanging eaves, ornamental trusses and decorative textured surfaces - slate roof with copper flashing. Single arched shutters, and carved post, contemporary weathervane. Northern Maine, 19th century.



Given the overall size of the carriage house, the cupola is at least 10' high!





A beautifully balanced cupola. Almost oriental with its spare aesthetic. Wide high curving hip roof, tapered base with vertical tongue and groove face boards, simple paired arched shutters and trim work, and carved post. Notice the size and spacing of the shutter's louvers compared to the cupola's shutters below. Western Maine, 19th century. Approximately 4' x 4' x 8'-9"

While not stylish, it does proportionally balance well with the carriage house. The paneled base is a nice detail in an otherwise simple design. Wide low hip roof, paired rectangle shutters, and carved post. Northern Maine, 19th century.



Another wonderful example of 19th century cupola design. Perfectly scaled and integrated into the carriage house's pavilion hip roof. A tapered cedar shingled base, paired arched shutters with proportionately spaced and sized louvers, moderately curved hip roof, finely detailed dentil, scroll and trim work. Notice the deep, steeply pitched sill. Contemporary weathervane. Western Maine, 19th century.



A feast for the eyes - another example where the cupola's architecture exceeds the main structure, and is clearly meant to be the architectural focal point.



Simple but well proportioned. Large paired arched shutters, narrow columns, slightly tapered base with horizontal clapboards, and wide moderately curving hip roof with carved post. Western Maine, 19th century.



Nicely proportioned cupola with a massive turned post. Paired arched shutters and metal clad hip roof. Notice the unusual height of the cupola's base relative to the carriage house roof line. Kennebec river valley, Maine 19th century.



2 1/2 story carriage house. While simple, it reinforces the importance of large cupola sizes relative to the structure.



Paired rectangular shutters and paneled base. Wide hipped bonnet metal clad roof with carved post. While simple the shutters and panels contrasting colors compliment and enhance the overall carriage house design. Northern Maine, 19th century.



In-town barn cupola. Tapered base with vertical trim boards, paired *lancet* arch shutters, high pitched hipped bonnet cedar shingled roof with Iron spire. Western Maine, 19th century.



High pitched hipped bonnet metal clad roof. Paired rectangle shutters, small ornate brackets, clapboard sided base, and a beautiful W. L. Cushing & sons banneret vane, cardinals, globes and finial. Train station Western Maine, 19th century.





Paired shallow arched shutters, decorative textured shingle base, hipped bonnet metal clad roof with Iron mast and A. L. Jewel & Company cardinal points. Central Maine, 19th century.



Folk Victorian - matching textured surface with main house. What the cupola lacks for attention getting detail is made up for with size. Notice how it draws one eye.



Beautiful Italianate cupola - slate, low pitched hip roof, wide overhanging eaves with intricate scroll brackets, paired deeply arched Roman shutters with narrow columns / spatial treatment around the shutters, vertical base and carved post. 19th century, Western Vermont.



Unusual side gabled roof with Greek revival pediment (matches the side gabled carriage house roof), single rectangle shutters, clapboard sided base, mid-section and gables with mill work complimenting the carriage house's. Northern Maine 19th century.



Mansard roof carriage house. Paired *lancet* shutters, hipped metal clad roof, scroll brackets and carved post. Notice the complimenting lancet arch window below. Western Maine, 19th century.